



Increasing Access

FALL 2008

Poverty Matters

Strategies for Increasing Access

Developed for leaders in recreation and active living to mobilize change and increase opportunities for physical activity.





Access

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Strategies for Increasing Access

Poverty is a complex issue that affects people in more ways than lack of financial resources. Other factors known as social determinants of health, such as income, literacy and employment conditions, can also influence health.

Studies have shown that income or level of educational attainment can positively correlated with physical activity and health status. In other words, the lower one's income level, the less physically active and the worse one's health generally is.

Leaders in the recreation field understand that physical activity contributes to health and wellbeing. Many recreation departments are already advocating for equitable access to physical activity and recreation opportunities for people living with poverty despite pressure on them to recover costs and increase revenues. Ensuring that people living in poverty have opportunities to gain health benefits from physical activity through programs, services and amenities requires commitment and investment by local governments. Communities that lead the way in increasing access value the important health and social outcomes of investment rather than focusing on the potential financial loss. Leading communities also find creative solutions to address community need because they understand that ensuring equitable access means more than just removing financial barriers.

Strategies for Increasing Access provides ideas for actions that can be taken by programmers and managers to help people living in poverty increase their participation in physical activity. Access initiatives may not end poverty, but by improving

quality of life and by supporting participation in community life, they can make a crucial contribution to the health of all community members.

What Can You Do to Increase Access to Physical Activity?

In order for recreation departments to concretely make an impact on the health and well-being of people affected by poverty, they need to:

- 1) Develop a complete understanding of the barriers that can prevent involvement by engaging people affected by poverty.
- 2) Raise awareness of the potential health impact physical activity opportunities may have.
- 3) Tailor comprehensive strategies to specifically address those barriers.
- 4) Measure the outcomes and report back to decision makers.

Successful strategies address one or more barriers to participation. They are based on input from members of the affected group(s) and help participants understand the benefits of being physically active. Successful strategies also create a supportive environment and provide a range of opportunities for activity to appeal to individual needs and interests.



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Although implementing these actions may seem simple, staff time, resources and organizational support may be limited. Recreation practitioners sometimes have a personal passion for social justice and their advocacy work is often a sideline project that comes after program planning, managing the staffing and operation of a facility and putting out fires day-to-day. Listed below are a number of strategies to help leaders in recreation and active living in bringing those sideline activities more easily to the forefront.

How Much Physical Activity will Help People Gain Health Benefits?

Physical activity refers to any form of movement that increases energy expenditure in all aspects of daily living. Health Canada recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most days to reduce cardiovascular diseases and overall mortality. Their Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living for adults recommends accumulating 30 to 60 minutes of moderate physical activity most days, preferably daily.¹

Adults between the ages of 35 to 54 comprise 43% of the British Columbian population. 44% of this population is considered inactive, that is, they do not expend energy equivalent to walking for 30 minutes per day.

Many initiatives are aimed at increasing access to recreation for children, youth and seniors. However, adults living in poverty often bear the brunt of attitudes that hold individuals responsible for their socio-economic status and physical activity levels. There are often limited opportunities aimed at supporting and educating adults living in poverty to develop physical health and maintain an active lifestyle. It is important to remember that adults are key influencers on the physical activity levels of their families.

Listen to Those You Want to Participate

In every community, it may be known that a group or a number of groups are physically inactive, but it is unclear why programs, services and amenities are not being accessed, even if they are subsidized or free. To learn about why, the best way is to invite their input. The people who know best about living in poverty in your community are those with first hand experience.

- Invite ongoing input from people living in poverty by hosting focus groups, setting up advisory committees, collaborating and having one-on-one conversations and interviews. Such dialogue opportunities are essential to understanding the barriers specific to your community. If you don't know who isn't participating, connect with key community organizations that work with people living in poverty.
- This may take time at the outset, but once such activities are built-in to the regular program planning schedule, they will become a normal part of business.
- Low income citizens and other key contacts may not have the time to take on a regular advisory role, but they could be asked to provide input on:
 - Dates, times and locations
 - Instructors and program content
 - Social activities
 - Other barriers such as transportation, safety concerns and child care.³
- Involving residents and key individuals as promoters and program leaders can help ensure programs and services are community-connected and culturally sensitive.⁴ Sometimes, personal connection with the leader, coordinator or other participants is the key to participation.

- As a starting point, some key factors which may encourage participation include:
 - Gender-specific programming
 - Family or social support to encourage and enable participation

Marie's daughter was able to attend swimming lessons because the City of Ottawa subsidized the class. Marie signed up for a free women-only fitness program after seeing a poster on the front desk. When Marie went to the first class, she was surprised to see that only three other women were enrolled. After a couple of weeks, she was the only one still attending. After her daughter's eight-week set was finished, even Marie stopped going. After a month or so, she received a phone call from the program organizer to attend a focus group about the women-only program. The organizer assured her they just wanted to find out how to make the program more appealing. After the focus group, Marie received an invitation in the mail to register again and to bring a friend. Marie and her friend Nicole signed up and they luckily got the last two spaces. On the first day of class, Marie noticed that most of the women who attended the focus group also signed up and also brought friends. She was also happy to see that many of the suggestions provided at the focus group were incorporated into the program, such as child care and help with transportation costs. In addition to fitness, the classes also taught healthy habits and provided a time to be social with other moms. Another suggestion that was implemented was to charge \$1 each class, which everyone seemed to be happy to pay. Ten years later, Marie no longer needs to attend Woman Alive! because she is now comfortable participating in a bootcamp class on her own. However, she is happy to see that the program is still helping women develop knowledge and confidence and that she had a hand in this at the beginning.²

- Welcoming environment
- Access to proper clothing and equipment to "fit-in" with other participants
- Introductory opportunities to develop basic sport/fitness skills
- Increasing familiarity with the concept of recreation or community centre. For example, some immigrants may come from countries with no formal recreation centres.⁵

No matter how you involve people affected by poverty, it is a good idea to collect their comments and report back to key decision-makers. The results of your conversations contribute to gaining a wider understanding of the reality of community members. You may receive insights that inform more than recreation programming, potentially revealing other ways you can help positively impact the health and lives of people living in poverty.

Factors in increasing participation

- Involve low income participants in the design and planning of programs
- Provide quality activities
- Consider transportation options
- Encourage participation both through traditional forms of advertising, but also personal contact and targeted invitation
- Identify programs that are free or low-cost
- Interact respectfully
- Ensure program staff who relate well with target participants
- Conduct follow-up phone calls to those who have not attended regularly
- Monitor programs and be responsive to comments³



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Raise Awareness of Opportunities and Benefits

David signed up for the Honour Your Health Challenge because his wife and son signed up. He didn't really think that after 13 weeks, he would be ready to walk ten kilometers at the Sun Run, nor that his health conditions (obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure) would get any better. David slogged through the training with his family, even though it was the heart of winter. It was hard at the beginning but he was astounded when he hit the five kilometer mark. He was even more amazed that every time they added another kilometer– it seemed easier and easier. In addition to the InTraining walking program, David's community was chosen to receive heart health screening before, during and after the training program. They also had live guest speakers who spoke about things like diet and how to quit smoking. They had access to coaches over the internet who provided training tips and motivation. His wife even started training to be a walk leader for next year. Her advice at home was great too! By the end of the 13 weeks, David's weight had dropped below 250 pounds, and he no longer had high blood pressure! Another amazing thing was that he found himself committing to stop smoking! He was amazed that this one free program taught him more about his health and how to take care of himself than he'd learned his whole life. He is positive that he's added years to his life.⁶

Health literacy is one of the concepts introduced in the Understanding Poverty section. Health literacy is a person's ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information to promote and maintain one's health. It is generally tied to educational attainment and other determinants of health. In the context of recreation access, health literacy impacts one's ability to find information about physical activity opportunities and connect this with the potential for positive health outcomes.

- A 2004 study showed that Canadian adults with lower educational levels and lower levels of income reported that the financial cost of physical activity and a lack of awareness of opportunities were the top two barriers to their participation in physical activity.⁷

- They were also less likely to report receiving information that would help build more physical activity into their lives even though the same study showed that municipal recreation departments reported the availability of such information.⁷

Efforts to increase access to physical activity levels for people affected by poverty need to focus not only on providing programs and services, but also ensuring that information on "how, where and why" to be physically active is simple, easily available and developed with the needs of the target audience in mind. This information also needs to be delivered in ways that effectively reach the target group(s).⁷ So how do you do this?

- Again, asking people affected by poverty what works for them is a good starting point. In some cases, a personal touch such as a phone call or personal invitation for input is also a factor in future participation.
- If you don't know how to reach people living in poverty, forge relationships with community organizations and informal leaders to receive input and disseminate information.
- Develop simplified materials that explain where to get more information on recreation and physical activity opportunities, which may be translated if need be.

To help improve health literacy in your community, learn about tools tailored for specific populations and share them with your partners.

- Multicultural communities may benefit from ESL healthy living resources such as teaching modules and lesson plans for ESL teachers that introduce active living and healthy eating values to newcomers, increasing their health literacy.⁸
- Aboriginal community members can benefit from resource kits developed for community health practitioners and child educators that introduce traditional Aboriginal activities and reinforce holistic cultural values around health.⁹

Or try a social marketing campaign to raise community awareness about the benefits of physical activity and what opportunities are available through public programs, services and amenities. If you know of a vulnerable group in your community, work with partners to try a targeted campaign.

Ensure a Range of Opportunities to Choose From

Dora lives in Edmonton and has a very limited income because she is supporting herself and her elderly parents. She has always been a shy person and although she wants to exercise with friends, she finds it difficult to ask for a discounted admission. More often than not, she stays home rather than exercise. One of her close friends who knows Dora's situation asked at the community centre what kind of options Dora has. The front-desk staff told her that Edmonton has a policy of providing a "continuum of opportunities." Dora's friend found out about "priceless activities" that are available to all citizens at no cost, such as parks and trails, outdoor skating rinks and free drop-in times. The staff person also talked about "targeted initiatives" or low-cost opportunities based on needs in the community. In Dora's neighbourhood, there are low-cost registered programs for women only, a walking club and weekly loonie swims. There is also the Leisure Access Program for both individuals living below the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut Off and for organizations that support people needing social assistance. Dora would never be able to bring herself to apply for the Leisure Access Program, but her friend is now aware of the other opportunities to exercise and has made plans to swim with Dora at the loonie swim next week.¹⁰

Recreation, physical activity, exercise, leisure time – these mean different things to different people, depending on their lived experience, interest and cultural influences. To support increasing the physical activity levels of people living in poverty, it is important to ensure a range of opportunities to be physically active.

There are many different ways to be physically active. Formal exercise programs and organized sports are some ways that people are active. It is also important to value activities that lie outside the realm of "exercise" or "sport" including gardening, dance and traditional activities. In some cultures, celebrations and food are traditionally associated with forms of physical activity, so they may be important factors to incorporate.

To increase physical activity in inactive individuals, popular activities, introductory and skill development classes tend to be appealing. Opportunities to develop basic skills will encourage participation, as people often need to know that they will succeed before they will adopt something new.

Municipalities are well positioned to work with community organizations to coordinate or help facilitate outreach to specific groups and support their ongoing participation through targeted programming⁷ particularly for:

- Inactive people who want to ease into physical activity
- Participants who are not confident in their skills
- Those who are not familiar with recreation or community centres

A supportive built environment can be critical in enabling physical activity for people living in poverty by increasing the visibility of physical activity and reducing perceived barriers.⁷ Here are some things to consider:

- Improving safe walking access to public transit has great health benefits for low-income individuals. Not only are low-income and minority groups more likely to be transit users, they are more likely to walk to public transit and more likely to spend more than 30 minutes walking to a transit stop.¹¹
- In order to support programs aimed at encouraging low-income people to walk in their neighbourhoods, consideration must be given to limited or poorly maintained sidewalks, perceived sense of park safety, availability of free recreational programs and convenience of transportation to activities in other locations.¹²



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The How and Why of Subsidies

Program and service affordability is a key issue for people living in poverty. Although there are many issues related to poverty, efforts to build inclusive recreation and physical activity programs must take into account the issue of affordability. However, proposals to introduce or revise subsidy programs can often stimulate a great deal of debate around the potential financial and social impacts.

Communities that lead the way in access initiatives understand that in order to ensure recreation opportunities are accessible, investment in staff and financial resources is necessary. In evaluating the programs, value is placed on the social benefit that results rather than the dollar amount that may have been made. The reality is that if people living in poverty cannot afford the programs, they will not participate anyway.

Beyond the Bottom Line

Measuring the outcomes of initiatives demonstrates the value and positive changes that occur as a result of investment in programs and services. Quantitative and qualitative data is particularly useful for capturing social and health benefits. Check out this step-by-step toolkit, the SMART Fund Guide to Using Outcomes to Design & Manage Community Health Activities, which leads you through planning, managing and evaluating initiatives. www.smartfund.ca/guide.htm

Although many communities do offer subsidy programs, some of these programs can actually result in discouraging the participation of people living in poverty because the process of receiving the subsidies can create barriers, rather than

remove them. Application processes that have been identified to create barriers include:

- Requirements to provide proof of income
- Cumbersome application forms
- Interviews involving personal questions
- Situations where the applicant feels judged or stereotyped
- Applications only available at certain times
- Limited access to clear information about subsidy opportunities including who qualifies and how to apply
- Lack of existing relationship with the person providing assistance⁵

In one study, low income women said that they felt humiliated by such programs because they were made to feel as if they were begging for reduced fees. Many of the study participants asked, “Why is a subsidy offered at all if it is so difficult to obtain?”¹³

Staff who administer fee subsidy programs have also identified a number of issues including:

- Lack of training in working with diverse groups
- Increasing pressure to address the bottom line of cost recovery
- Time pressures to balance workload
- Lack of resources to change or improve the system¹³

Innovative programs have been developed to address the barriers identified by program participants, staff and others.

The City of Kelowna’s Access to Recreation Program leverages community partnerships for an effective fee subsidy program:

- Recreation Opportunities Coupon Program – Each coupon booklets contains 25 admissions to city-run drop-in programs and/or facility usage. They are provided yearly to over 50 community organizations which are responsible for distributing them to clients. The only administration task for the recreation front desk staff is to collect the coupons and forward them to the Community Recreation Coordinator, who records the number on the coupon

to identify the distributing agency. In addition, clients may use the coupon to purchase a one or three month facility pass at a 50% discounted rate.

- Gift Certificates for Registered Programs – A gift certificate system to enable the participation in registered programs is also advertised through over 50 community support organizations. Although a meeting with the Community Recreation Coordinator is necessary (in-person or over the phone), an income statement and other documentation is not required. This meeting is intended to educate and coach participants and answer their questions. The individual is given a gift certificate that they can use when they register for a program.
- Access Passes for Persons with Disabilities – A number of fee reduction options and program support volunteers are available to ensure access for persons with disabilities; as well as numerous targeted programs.

What to Say When They Say...³

“We offer a subsidy but no one ever takes advantage of it.”

There are many reasons why people may not take advantage of fee subsidy programs, but in general it helps to:

- Increase awareness – often fee assistance programs are not well advertised for fear of abuse. When information is difficult to find, however, those who need the assistance will likely not seek out the information.
- Alleviate barriers – the application process itself can be a barrier primarily because the process often requires proof of poverty and makes the applicant feel judged or belittled in an already sensitive situation.
- Anticipate barriers – it’s not just about money. Even if individuals receive a fee subsidy, the many layers of barriers (transportation, scheduling, childcare, apparel, self-esteem, etc.) also prevent participation. It is important to develop strategies to help alleviate those barriers too.

“If we offer a subsidy everyone will want one, and it will be abused.”

Yes, the reality is that there will be some people who abuse the opportunity for subsidy, but the majority of people who access fee subsidy programs are in real need of assistance and would not be able to participate otherwise. Some communities have developed strategies to address this:

- Develop partnerships - some communities administer their fee subsidy programs through community partners who work directly with people in need of fee assistance. Because the partner organizations already have a relationship developed with individuals, they are in a better position to assess need, and the privacy of the individual is also maintained.
- Trust government-issued documents - some communities only require income assistance cards, etc. at time of application for subsidy so that front desk staff are able to approve the subsidy without an onerous application process and without the client needing to divulge personal income information.
- Offer flexible payment plans - some individuals may not be able to pay for programs or passes in one lump sum so they do not bother participating at all. Providing opportunities for flexible payment options (e.g., monthly bank withdrawals for an annual facility pass) may enable participation by more people.
- Provide free and low-cost opportunities as part of regular programming - some communities offer free, loonie or twoonie programs as part of regular programming that is available to everyone. While there will be participants who do not need the discount, it is an opportunity for all community members to be physically active without feeling like they are singled out or receiving “charity.” Some popular programs include free walking clubs, loonie swims or public skates.



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“We can’t afford it. All programs need to be cost recovery.”

While there has been increasing pressure for cost recovery in recent years, most recreation departments retain the mandate of providing services for all community members. The need to develop strategies for inclusion may need to be addressed at the policy level, but in the mean time, there are many ways to ensure that people living in poverty have opportunities to be physically active:

- First and foremost, talk to people living in poverty in your community. Most will say that they do not want a “hand out” and would like to pay what they can in a dignified manner. Talk to community members living in poverty and the organizations that work closely with them to determine what supports are needed and wanted.
- Drop-in programs are a service and are offered regardless of whether it is at capacity. Allowing drop-ins for free or at a subsidized rate may attract adults who cannot plan ahead because they are working part time or on-call.
- Low cost drop-in times at non-peak hours may attract shift workers and may even increase the number of people participating.
- Targeted programs may be developed and implemented through partnerships that involve cost sharing and may act as introductory opportunities for people who may not normally access recreation opportunities.
- Increasing active transportation alternatives that may be incorporated as a normal part of the community planning and park development process may have benefits for those who cannot afford to own an automobile. Improving sidewalks, bikeways and walking trails can be covered by capital funds and development charges, and there are also many grant funds available as there is a growing consciousness of climate change.

“How do we find out who is not using our programs and facilities and why they aren’t using them?”

Developing a profile of the community is a first step. This will give you a picture of who lives in the community compared with who you see in your programs.

- Statistics Canada (www.statcan.ca) and BC Stats (www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca) provide information on income and population characteristics for communities in BC.
- Municipal planning departments often compile local statistics from provincial and federal sources for planning purposes.
- Community social planning bodies (working either independently or as part of municipal government) conduct research and support partnership building among organizations working to address community issues such as poverty.

Once you’ve identified who your programs aren’t reaching, develop strategies to help get them involved.

- Develop relationships with different organizations and community leaders working with people who you believe are not accessing services and programs.
- Work with community service organizations and individuals affected by poverty to develop strategies, programs or services that address the needs of target populations.
- Make outreach a priority and be prepared to visit people at the places in the community where they are comfortable. Consider working with community agencies to offer off-site opportunities as a means of introducing programs to hard-to-reach communities and addressing transportation barriers.
- Develop a policy that outlines how your organization will commit to ensuring that programs and services meet all community needs. ●

Further Information

Further Information on - Strategies for Increasing Access

BC Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA) Resources to Promote Inclusion –

Culturally Responsive Service Delivery Training Package: In-service modules for frontline staff

Multicultural Resource Kit: Tools to improve cross-cultural communication and reaching out to ethnic and diverse groups

Anti-discrimination in Sport and Recreation –
www.bcrpa.bc.ca/recreation_parks/recreation/high_five/documents/Discrimination_000.pdf

Gender and Equity in Sport and Recreation –
www.bcrpa.bc.ca/recreation_parks/recreation/high_five/documents/GenderEquity.pdf

Sport and Recreation in Aboriginal Communities –
www.bcrpa.bc.ca/recreation_parks/recreation/high_five/documents/Aboriginal.pdf

Sport and Recreation with Children who have Disabilities –
www.bcrpa.bc.ca/recreation_parks/recreation/high_five/documents/Disability.pdf

Affordable Access to Recreation for Low Income Families (Lifestyle Information Network) – A collection of primarily Ontario-based access to recreation resources.
www.lin.ca/access-to-recreation

Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health Resources – Australia-based resources including “how to’s,” case studies and discussion papers.
www.ceh.org.au/resources/resbyceh.html

Count Me In Report and Workbook (Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse) –
www.count-me-in.ca

Communities Can Make Health Affordable (Lifestyle Information Network, 2001) –
lin.ca/resource-details/1786

Diabetes Medicine Bag – Culturally sensitive educational resource kits for Aboriginal families to help prevent Type 2 diabetes:
www.diabetesmedicinebag.com

Everybody’s Welcome (SPARC BC and BCRPA) – A social inclusion approach to program planning and development for recreation and parks services:
www.sparc.bc.ca/everybodys_welcome

Recreation Coordination Pilot (Families First Edmonton) – An Edmonton research project to determine the best way to deliver recreation counseling to low-income community members.
www.familiesfirstedmonton.ualberta.ca/ffe_programs_recreation.html

Honour Your Health Challenge (SportsMed BC) –
cms.nortia.org/Org/Org14/Content/Transient%20Pages/Honour%20Your%20Health%20Challenge.asp

Guide to Using Outcomes to Design & Manage Community Health Activities (Vancouver Coastal Health SMART Fund) –
www.smartfund.ca/guide.htm

Towards a Healthy Multicultural BC (website) (AMSSA and ELSA Net) – Links to health promotion materials for ESL instructors:
www.amssa.org/healthyliving/overview.html

List of References for Strategies for Increasing Access

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⁷ C. Cameron, C. Craig & C. Paolin. (2004) “A Municipal Perspective on Opportunities for Physical Activity: Trends from 2000-2004.” *Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute*.

⁸ Towards a Health Multicultural BC (website) (AMSSA and ELSA Net: www.amssa.org/healthyliving/overview.html)

⁹ Diabetes Medicine Bag website (www.diabetesmedicinebag.com)

¹⁰ Based on City of Edmonton. Access to Recreation Strategy for Low-Income Edmontonians Logic Model (Community Services Department, City of Edmonton, 2005)

¹¹ L. Frank & K. Raine. (2007) “Creating a Healthier Built Environment in British Columbia.” Provincial Health Services Authority.

¹² L. Frank, S. Kavage & T. Litman. “Promoting Public Health through Smart Growth.” Smart Growth BC.

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